D Jmeek - 2/18/89

POINT OF VIEW

FRED MARTIN: ART AND HISTORY—SATURDAY IN MANHATTAN: TWO FRIENDS AT THE WHITNEY

I had left San Francisco on Friday at 3:00 A.M., had checked into my New York hotel around 1:00 P.M. on Saturday and had read the jet-plane vibrations out of my body with Edwin Erdinger's *Ego and Archetype.*

I fell asleep around two with Erdinger and "All religious practices hold up to view the transpersonal categories of existence and attempt to relate them to the individual. Religion is the best collective protection available against both inflation and alienation. . . . However, although collective methods protect man from the dangers of the psychic depths, they also deprive him of the individual experience of these depths and the possibility of development which such experience promotes. . . . The fact is that today large numbers of individuals do not have living, functioning, suprapersonal categories by which they can understand life experience, supplied either by the church or otherwise . . . when the archetypes have no adequate container such as an established religious structure, they have to go somewhere else because the archetypes are facts of psychic life. One possibility is that they will be projected into banal or secular matters. The transpersonal value can then become how high one's standard of living is, or personal power, or some social reform movement, or any one of a number of political activities. This happens in Nazism, the radical right, and in Communism, the radical left. The same sort of dynamism can be projected into the race problem, either as racism or antiracism. Personal, secular, or political actions become charged with unconscious religious meaning. . . . Whenever a religious motivation is acting unconsciously it causes fanaticism with all its destructive consequences."

I woke with the very early Saturday morning sun, had a miserable breakfast in the hotel cafe and took the bus for a day at the Met where I met by accident the friend of whom I wrote in my last column. I left the Met in the late afternoon and walked the few blocks to the Whitney, where two other friends were showing: David Park, who was the most powerful single influence on me when I was a student forty years ago, and Al Wong, whom I've known as a fellow artist for almost twenty years but whose work I've never really experienced except for the respect that artists give each other (otherwise, who will?).

David's show had all the old familiar faces and, of course, many more I'd never seen. The catalog quoted a piece David wrote for a show back in the early 1950s in which he said that the only authenticity of one's art is the authenticity of one's self, one's little, ordinary, real self. I remembered the night in one of the old California School of Fine Arts studios when David told me that, the most important lesson he ever taught me—and I remembered also his other lesson, the one taught by the glorious tactility of his paint: art is, through and through, a shining substance.

The last part of David's show was the long scroll he had made while in the hospital near the end of his life. As far as tactility is concerned, the scroll is made with felt-tip markers on rice paper. After all, David said, these were pictures—not paintings. The scroll is a panorama of, I guess, Boston (where David grew up) on a summer day in the early 1930s. It unfolds with scene after scene filled with people in all kinds of ordinary summer-day activities. The next-to-the-last scene shows an old man selling balloons to a little boy as a woman (mother? aunt?) looks on. The boy reaches, and the bright colored balloons pull up and away. The last scene comes on immediately. It is an empty street. There's a round sign, DEAD END, and written on it in ball point pen, *David Park.*

I went into Al Wong's multimedia installation *Each Time I See You, I Feel It Could Be the Last Time.* There were a number of the sort of "shadows on the screen" pieces of the kind I had seen before, and there was one "shadow" with a small TV set on a kitchen table in the center of the room and a few chairs facing it. I sat down in the middle chair and began to watch.

Once in a while—the tape seemed nearly a hour long—I looked up to see the visitors to the gallery. Many were women in long fur coats. Faux fur is out; real fur down to the ankles is in. I remembered "transpersonal values can become secularized in how high one's standard of living is," and also remembered David's little apartment in Berkeley in the 1950s and Al Wong's trouble this year with finding a studio he could afford. But mostly I just stared at the screen.

The installation was planned as the shadow of Al Wong's father standing beside the TV set, his arm resting on the top, holding his pipe, and his cane leaning against the oil-cloth-covered table the set was on. The video itself was like an hour, going on and on, of poor-quality family home movies, seemingly randomly spliced together—and it was a lifetime of a father's memories of family and of a son's love for his father and, through him, his whole family. It was so strange and boring sitting there watching a family album tape drone on and on, New Yorkers coming and going, even a couple of San Francisco folks dropping by for a bit; it was so strange and boring, and then as I slowly realized what I was seeing, it became so gripping, until at last it came to the end, a flashlight shining on a card, " . . . Dad had a stroke . . . ," so overwhelming with the force of its affirmation of life.

Afterward, I read the Whitney's handout about the piece. I thought it was a most turgid late-Marxist postmodernist political racist/antiracist missing of the point of the enormous power of Al's gift to us of an experience of the "psychic depths and the possibilities for development which such experience promotes." Al's gift of his transpersonal art to us had been used by the Whitney's curator for his own "personal, secular, or political actions . . . charged with unconscious religious meaning. . . . Whenever a religious motivation is acting unconsciously it causes fanaticism with all its destructive consequences."

A Polish artist asked me the other day what is special about Bay Area art. I think David Park and Al Wong both have the answer. It is that art may be for some in the Bay Area a way to open the personal into the transpersonal, to experience love and, by showing the experience of love, lead others into it also. It's not politics, it's religion—the religion of us in our little time, our small space on earth: and then we're gone, the street is empty and our signatures are not even memories. □